

**SUBDIVISION DEVELOPMENT IN WINTER RANGE
OPERATIONS MEETING
JUNE, 2000**

The information in this report was provided by the environmental staff biologists in the seven regions and compiled by Tracey Trent.

OVERVIEW

Subdivision development in big game winter range is a significant wildlife habitat issue in Idaho, particularly for mule deer and elk. The amount and quality of winter range is very often the factor limiting deer and elk populations. Subdivision development in winter ranges constitutes a permanent loss of habitat and a permanent reduction of the carrying capacity of the land for big game. This loss of a habitat component in short supply results in fewer deer and elk for hunters.

Winter range provides two critical needs: shelter and food. At one time wildlife biologists thought food was the most important component of winter range and their efforts were directed to measuring the production of winter range plants and planting desirable species. This was important, but food resources are not the only reason why animals select an area to winter. Of equal, and in some instances more, importance is the microclimate of the winter range and how it enhances the ability of animals to minimize their energy loss during a time of food shortage.

Slope, elevation, aspect and vegetative cover combine to make some places warmer, more secure and less snowy. Animals wintering in these areas do not deplete their fat reserves as fast and are therefore more likely to survive the winter. When winter ranges are lost to subdivisions this important "place" is lost and cannot be replaced or mitigated by enhancing vegetation in an adjacent area.

Subdivisions are also responsible for direct mortality to deer and elk. Contrary to popular belief deer and elk do not avoid subdivisions, they are commonly attracted to them. The lush and nutritious ornamental plants draw deer and elk into subdivisions where they often fall prey to automobiles, fences and pets. It also brings them into close contact with well-intentioned but misguided humans who feed them in the winter. Winter feeding increases the attraction to subdivisions and can have disease implications, for humans as well as wildlife.

Winter concentrations of big game also attract natural predators to subdivisions. Mountain lions attracted to subdivisions in winter range kill pets and also pose a public safety risk.

PANHANDLE REGION by Chip Corsi

Winter range development is primarily an issue for white-tailed deer, and primarily in Bonner County. For the most part, elk are using anything below @3000 feet elevation, and there is still lots of open space at those elevations. They don't tend to concentrate on specific winter range sites up here like they do in S. Idaho. WTD are using valley bottoms, particularly sites with good snow interception provided by mature timber stands. These are the sites most at risk from development. Some of this has been lost in Kootenai County, but it doesn't seem to be as critical as it is in areas which get higher snowfall, and in particular the Priest Lake area. In the exceptional big snow year, we lose a few deer down here (Kootenai County), but they bounce back pretty quickly. As you know, they are a pretty adaptable and resilient critter. Some formerly heavily used areas, such as the Fernan Lake area, have essentially been lost as good winter range, although a few deer still find a way to use it (much of that is city P&Z who virtually never contact us). A few years back we identified critical WTD winter range for the Bonner County Plan. All of their subdivision/development proposals come by us, and they seem to be "OK" about following our recommendations - we haven't had any real Donnybrooks over winter range stuff, and sometimes they are quite good about it. Not much winter range (or other) development is occurring in the other counties (Benewah, Shoshone, Boundary), and they rarely consult with us.

Right now, as far as I know, only Kootenai and Bonner counties have (or rely on) comp plans. We are routinely given an opportunity to review their development proposals, and we had significant input on both Comp Plans. Bonner County has a better map when it comes to identifying big game winter range and other wildlife habitats, Kootenai's is more general, but probably OK. I don't feel like Kootenai County really considers wildlife that much on a project by project basis unless enough people raise a stink and it helps them (County) out with other issues. In general I'd say Bonner County puts more stock in our recommendations than Kootenai.

I've pretty much already alluded to our success in working with the counties. Kootenai County has enacted some water quality protection rules which will benefit wintering WTD (such as retaining naturally vegetated buffers on streams). As I noted before, wildlife input doesn't seem to count for a whole lot on individual projects in Kootenai unless they are looking to modify or deny it on other counts as well (there are some exceptions to that). Bonner seems to do a better job of using recommendations, and considering wildlife up front. The other counties typically only consult with us when it serves their interest - ie, they are looking to deny or modify a proposal.

Winter range issues are not nearly as critical up here as they are in other parts of the state. Our big winter elk losses a few years ago really had little or nothing to do with development, except in very local situations - the snow was just too deep, too long, everywhere. With a few exceptions like Priest Lake and some other Bonner County lowlands (such as the LPO lakeshore and Pend Oreille River area), and other smaller areas such as Fernan, WTD's seem to find a way around development. If we lose key habitats around Priest or some of the other Bonner County stuff, we will suffer a hit, however. Right now we have WTD in abundance, despite one of the most severe

winters in recorded history just a couple of years ago. The only other big issue for winter range right now, also largely under county control, is snowmobile access. We seem to have had pretty good success in limiting conflicts where new trails are proposed, but a lot of it is not restricted.

CLEARWATER REGION by Gregg Servheen

Idaho county probably has the most private land that is winter range. They do nothing to protect winter range. The whole lower Salmon corridor is winter range for deer and elk and there is a lot of potential for development and associated roading to really have an impact. Also, of course is the problem with noxious weeds coming with development. They have no comprehensive plan nor are they interested in it.

Lewis and Clearwater Co. have some winter ranges along the lower Clearwater. No protection there either but they are more (only a little) interested in comprehensive planning. We have done little with these counties. Private timber company land makes up a large part of private land in the county and some of this is winter range.

Nez Perce Co. has some but most is in star thistle. Nothing really you could clearly ID as winter range except Clearwater River corridor and lower Potlatch River corridor. They have interested in conservation and have a comprehensive plan. Their F/W habitat and winter range protection in the plan is limited though.

Latah Co. is of course the most progressive and interested but they don't so much have winter range as they do big game and wildlife habitats. Slow development and roading due to ranchette type development on 40-acre parcels are threatening these areas. We are actively working with them on habitat protection in their county plan. As it stands, we have recommend they include "review by IDFG" in the plan for developments, etc.

I think there should be very strong consideration by IDFG for the effects of development on streams, riparian areas, and floodplains. Many tributaries in the lower Clearwater and Salmon are anadromous streams that can and are being affected by development and community encroachment. I realize this is a different issue but it ties closely to how we work with counties within comprehensive planning.

SOUTHWEST REGION by Scott Grunder

Ada and Boise Counties have the most development and future potential for development in big game winter ranges. In Ada Co., it is primarily deer, but Boise County is a mix. Other counties with potential for winter range development include Gem, Washington, Payette, and Valley. I think there is a mix of elk and deer on these winter ranges.

I know that Ada, Boise, Valley, and Washington Counties have comprehensive plans but I'm not sure about Gem and Payette. Ada and Boise Counties do identify big game winter ranges in their comprehensive plans and are considered by P & Z boards.

As you know we have been successful in working with both Ada and Boise Counties to recognize the importance of winter range. Ada County has a Foothills Plan and Ordinance (mirrors Boise City's) and big game and wildlife are important considerations. They require clustered development, minimal roading, much open space, etc in design. "Protect" is a key word. Are these requirements enough to protect winter range? I only wish they were. Development continues unabated. Ada County requires all development types to solicit a wildlife review of their prospective properties prior to submission for consideration. This requires more work on my part, but it is probably worth it from the standpoint of winter range and nongame wildlife.

I am attaching the information Tracey Trent, Jerry Scholten and I worked on for winter range development. I think the Director will find this stuff helpful in identifying issues associated with winter range development.

MAGIC VALLEY REGION by Dave Parrish

Blaine Co. - elk winter range has been replaced by very expensive homes. This loss of native range has created "collateral damage" in that private feed sites have sprung-up due to people feeling guilty about the loss of habitat. Now, elk are concentrated in subdivisions where they ravage ornamental landscaping and attract predatory species (mountain lions, wolves) which then find domestic pets are easier to catch than elk.

We also have a major migration corridor for mule deer coming from the north, (Stanley - Galena) to winter near Magic Reservoir. We've had mixed success in protecting the corridor from residential development depending on changes in the make-up of the County Commission. Limitations on fencing, building envelope placement, 100 yard wide clear zones, control of domestic pets and livestock, secure storage of hay and grain, etc. are all mitigation measures used to minimize impacts.

Blaine County Comprehensive Plan identifies these wintering/migratory areas but allows building with mitigation. What has happened, however, is cumulative effects are taking their toll on local wildlife populations.

We have a very good working relationship with Blaine County and they are receptive to our recommendations - the problem is, we are dealing with big dollar developers and their attorneys. As an example, I testified to the impacts on fish and wildlife from development of an area between Ketchum and Hailey known as Owl Rock. The P&Z and Commission findings supported not allowing development because of wildlife impacts but the developer eventually won in court (four years later).

On an issue related to residential development - in Blaine Co., winter recreation groups and developers are pressuring the county and USFS to allow plowing of roads to enhance access to areas for x-country skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, dog sled tours, year-around residences and yurts, and snowmobiling. The few remaining secure areas we had due to limited access are now becoming major recreation areas - this sells quality of life, which, in turn, sells more homes. We have worked with the both agencies to limit damage but have lost court battles - primarily because of access rights and safety issues. Our big concern now is that technological advances in snowmobiles and heli-skiing have resulted in encroachment into mountain goat and wolverine winter habitat.

Camas Co. and Elmore Co. - Elk winter ranges still exist and are experiencing residential encroachment. Level of development appears to be about 10 - 15 years behind Blaine Co. We've had success working with Camas Co. but not had much luck to date with Elmore Co. Cabins continue to "pop-up" in the Pine-Featherville area with little regard for impacts to fish or wildlife.

Elmore/Gooding Co. – There is a concentration of wintering mule deer on the Bennett front. Residential development has been "light", however, it's just a matter of time. Gooding Co. has been inconsistent in dealing with winter wildlife issues in relation to development. We need to put more time into working with P&Z and the County Commission in this county. Comprehensive Plans exist with little reference to measures to protect fish and wildlife habitat.

Cassia - Minidoka Counties - Light residential development in mule deer wintering areas, although, it appears to be on the increase. Not much success with protection of critical wildlife areas through Commissions or P&Z. I do not know the status of Comprehensive Plans for these counties. I assume they exist, but we have provided no input.

SOUTHEAST REGION by Jerome Hansen

Bannock, Bear Lake, and Franklin Counties are suffering from the most extensive sprawl onto both deer and elk winter range. Loss of winter range in Bannock County is mostly associated with people from Pocatello seeking their little piece of heaven. Both Franklin and Bear Lake counties are significantly affected by Utahans moving north to cheaper real estate options. The most significant and recent loss of winter range is starkly apparent on the west side of Bear Lake, where you can see the new log homes on the bench almost spring up overnight. Oneida County (our other border County) is also beginning to experience sprawl from the south. Loss of winter range in Caribou and Bingham counties is on the increase, but not as severe as the first three counties mentioned. Power County probably suffers the least impact to winter range in our region.

Bannock County has the most comprehensive plan to date, thanks in large part to my predecessor Mr. Lukens. The plan recognizes key wildlife habitats (deer and elk winter range and migration areas) and has special open space ordinances associated with those habitats. The plan also includes riparian and wetland setbacks. Time will tell how effective these will be.

Franklin County is also in the process of completing a county plan, which will hopefully recognize key wildlife areas and have special ordinances associated with them. Many of the Franklin County planning and zoning types are trying to do the right thing and recognize the importance of a good plan that protects open space and key wildlife areas. I understand that the private property rights zealots are threatening to stall the process, because of proposed restrictions on building.

We have also provided a wildlife map to Bear Lake County. We have tried to alert officials to the continuing loss of winter range on the west side of Bear Lake, but have had little luck altering the parade of homes. Bingham County officials are also concerned about urban sprawl and we are in the process of developing a key wildlife area map for them. We have had a little interaction with Caribou County (city of Soda Springs) on preserving the key big game migration corridor north of town. We haven't had much interaction with Oneida or Power counties, but we will hopefully do more with them in the future.

The southeast region is getting hit with an onslaught of highway improvement projects that bisect the region, including planned major improvements to Highway 30, 91, and 89. We continue to point out to ITD and other involved parties that a secondary impact of these road improvements are reduced commuting times (real or perceived) and the expansion of more people onto big game winter ranges. We recognize the need for the development of a Southeast Idaho Land Trust, or other like organization to work with counties and local landowners on conservation easements. Mike Whitfield of the Teton Valley Land Trust has met with us and other interested individuals in the past on the issue of conservation easements and the development of a land trust. We just have to find the right dedicated and talented person to take the bull by the horns. One of the key issues in the southeast is educating county officials and the public about all of the positives that conservation easements can provide.

UPPERSNAKE REGION by Bob Martin

Teton County is in the top 6 nationally for several years for % population increase.

Both elk and deer winter ranges are impacted. Most of the elk summer in Wyoming and are therefore not available to Idaho hunters. Idaho gets the depredation, winter feeding and brucellosis problems.

River bottoms of Henrys Fork and South Fork Snake (Fremont, Bonneville, and Madison counties) provide deer and elk winter range. These areas are experiencing increasing subdivisions and individual home development.

Fremont County has problems with wintering moose (Help! there's a moose in my yard). A good share of this is due to the wandering nature of moose rather than subdivision development.

Comprehensive Plans done for Teton and Fremont counties. Both take big game winter range "into consideration" but we have had very little success with big game winter range alone causing denial of plat applications. Fremont County better than Teton -- we actually succeeded once in getting major changes to a couple Fremont Co. proposals, one directly in the center of the migration route to the Sand Creek winter range. Otherwise, success has been limited to minor provisions in plat notes, such as wildlife-friendly fences and planting of screening vegetation. We have not been successful obtaining subdivision restrictions on human behavior -- such as no loose dogs, no feeding of wildlife other than songbirds, and bear-proof garbage.

Madison County has no comprehensive plan, Bonneville does but neither gives big game much consideration. There is not a great deal of subdivision development in winter ranges in these two counties.

One major thing we get from some of our subdivision planning work is excellent press. At least the public can see us standing up for wildlife and associated recreation.

For what it's worth, I believe active participation in Comprehensive Planning is a good use of our time. However it does seem that non-comprehensive planning P & Z work is our least return for time invested for all our work duties.

SALMON REGION by Jim Lukens

There is very little subdivision development in Lemhi and Custer Counties. Most occurs on Lemhi, East Fork, Pahsimeroi and main Salmon rivers. Winter range is mostly mule and whitetail deer with some elk. County commissioners solicit and obtain our input but we have had very limited success in getting our recommendations implemented as far as I can tell.

Actual big game winter range loss is relatively minor. Our problems include ornamental depredations, domestic pets, and loss of hunting opportunity near subdivisions. Another problem associated with subdivisions (and agriculture) is riparian impacts. They include vegetation manipulations, bridges, overgrazing, irrigation diversions,

culverts, bank erosion and associated repairs, channelization, etc. Since all of these streams are anadromous (and/or bull trout) waters and impacts are often significant.